

PLAYING WITH COLOR

By

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A Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Painting

University of Alaska Fairbanks

April 2018

APPROVED:

David Mollett, Committee Chair  
Todd Sherman, Committee Member  
Zoe Jones, Committee Member  
Charles Mason, Committee Member  
Kesler Woodward, Committee Member  
*Department of Art*

## Abstract

### Playing With Color by Sharon Hollensbe

This paper is a description of the history of my study of art for my Masters of Fine Art program, focusing mainly on painting, that were influenced by various artists and mentors over a 19 year period. I was accepted into the University of Fairbanks Art Department MFA program in 1999, withdrew in 2002, and re-applied and was accepted back into the program in 2015. My program concluded with a verbal presentation with PowerPoint, and a show of my paintings at the Well Street Art Company on April 6, 2018.

*For Sandra Hoefner, M.F.A., who constantly pushed me to keep going  
and inspired me by her example.*

## MFA PROJECT REPORT

In 1994 I took a job in Galena, an Alaska Native village on the Yukon River, to supervise a mental health and alcohol program for the six villages in the region. I had been living a conventional life in Atlanta, Georgia, working as a clinical psychologist, had been divorced for several years, and there was nothing to keep me from making a big change in my life. After working in Galena for two years I moved to Fairbanks in the Fall of 1996 and enrolled in a drawing class at UAF. I had long wanted to get into art and that seemed to be the window I could go through.

That first class in drawing was taught by Deborah Hayes and I subsequently took Beginning Painting from her. Her classes were fun and I felt inspired and encouraged to continue. That was the beginning of three years of undergraduate classes in painting, drawing and printmaking as well as art history.

In Summer 1997, I took Intermediate Painting from Eloise Larson. She had us complete numerous assignments and then took photos of us with our work.



This is the earliest photo I have from undergraduate art classes.

In Fall of 1997, I took advanced painting from Kes Woodward, and that was the class where I met Sandra Hoefner, an MFA student. She became an important mentor and long-time friends.

I started taking printmaking classes with Todd Sherman in 1998. I went through the basics of learning to make prints from linoleum blocks and copper plates, but my main interest was in making monotypes. With Todd's encouragement I experimented with various ways of mixing and applying oil-based ink so that the press would do some of the creative work.

A monotype is a one-of-a-kind print that is made on a flat surface such as a piece of Plexiglas. Ink is applied to the plate with rollers, paint brushes, old credit cards, etc. A clean piece of printmaking paper is laid on the plate, cloth blankets are laid on the top, and the whole thing is run through a press. The paper is removed and laid aside to dry.



Crossing Over is a monotype where I carefully dropped blobs of ink onto the bottom of the plate and let the press do the work of spreading it. The white ink at the bottom was pushed into pinnacles on the blue background by the pressure on the plate and paper.

***Sharon Hollensbe, Crossing over, monotype, 24x18, 1998***



Looking East is an example of a ghost print. The original or first print may be too dark, while the second run, the ghost print, may be just right. I entered this ghost print in a national student show at the University of Arizona, and it was accepted.

***Sharon Hollensbe, Looking East, monotype, 16x11, 1998***

Rain Dance is another monotype in which I added extra ink to the plate for the second



run through the press. I wanted some shapes and colors to be more emphatic. I also splattered mineral spirits across the plate to create the bubbles.

***Sharon Hollensbe, Rain Dance, Monotype, 18x24, 1999***

## **ACCEPTANCE INTO MFA PROGRAM**

In 1999, the Art Department created its own MFA program and my friend Sandra Hoefner, who was graduating with her MFA in the Northern Studies Department, encouraged me to apply for admission. It made sense to me because I believed that after undergraduate study, the natural path was to go to graduate school, and I was determined to keep improving

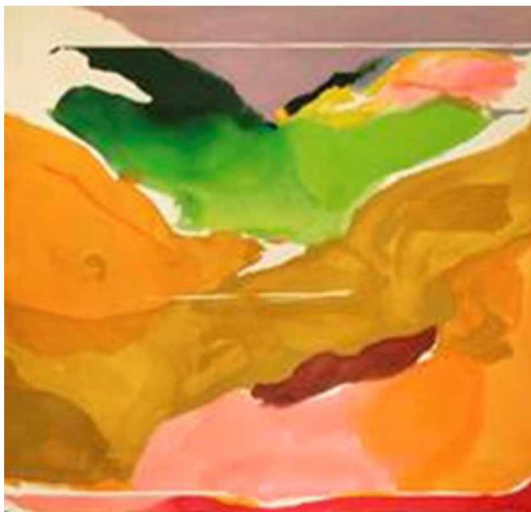
in making art. I was accepted into the program in Fall 1999, and began taking independent studies in painting and printmaking, as well as classes in art history.

A major influence on my painting at that time was the work of Helen Frankenthaler.



*Helen Frankenthaler, Credit Line, 1974*

Credit Line is a good example of the size of some of her poured works. She was able to control the staining process even in this very large size.



Nature Abhors a Vacuum seems to speak for itself. This is a good combination of colors and overlays, and hard to control. There is a lot of liveliness and humor in this painting, as though she must have enjoyed painting it.

*Helen Frankenthaler, Nature Abhors a Vacuum, 1973*





***Pieces of stained canvas, 2001***

paint, used a brayer to roll paint over another color, used my hands to spread paint, all to see what effects I could get. At that time, I was living in a house with a yard where I could lay out big pieces of canvas to work on. In addition, I had a covered deck where canvases could lay undisturbed to dry for an indefinite period of time. The most successful works were on raw,

stretched canvas. The water didn't warp the

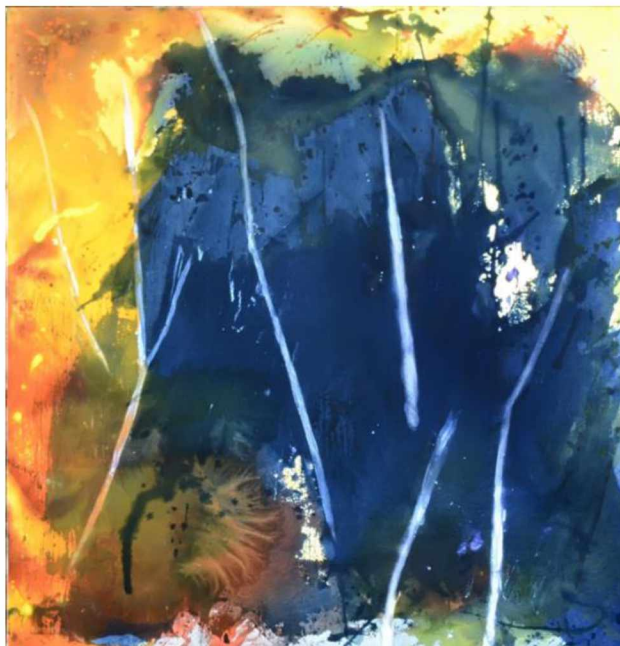
wood and the canvas did not wrinkle from

uneven drying. Untitled, 2001, left, was one of

the paintings that was stretched before the

paint was applied. I added the vertical lines at

the end.



***Sharon Hollensbe, Untitled, acrylic, 48x48, 2001***





Fires of August is another painting where the canvas was stretched before it was painted. I spent more time controlling the paint than I usually did, using masking tape to allow underlayers of color show. I'm guessing that I also applied some of the undercoat with a knife or a brush.

*Sharon Hollensbe, Fires of August, Acrylic, 40x30, 2001*

In 2000, I joined David Mollett's monthly critique group and remained a member until it ended around 2007. David was teaching us about art history as well as providing candid critiques of our work, and I felt discouraged much of the time from feeling attacked. I showed up at one critique without a painting, and saw that he was treating everyone the same. I told myself to get over it. Regardless of how I felt at times, there was no question that I was learning a lot and was gradually seeing the value in David's comments. Plus I must have realized at some level that David was putting enormous effort into teaching us, and my part of the deal was to show up and keep trying. Of all the art experiences that I had through the years, that critique group probably had the most profound impact on my development as an artist. I think it's realistic to say that I learned how to evaluate what made art good and why. And I became more able to see the usefulness from critiques, that weren't mostly compliments, in improving my work.

In 2002, I got a job and began phasing out of the MFA program, but I continued to paint at home and to attend David's critique group.

In 2010 I went to a collage workshop outside of Columbus Ohio, at the urging of Sandra Hoefner. The teacher, Fran Skiles, was a very inventive artist who had created a method for mounting works on paper that didn't have to be framed. This involved using layers of thick gesso, cheese cloth and canvas dried on a flat surface. The back was then covered by stained paper to improve the appearance, and reinforced with lattice. After this package was dried, paper or canvas could be glued onto the front side and collage pieces added.

We learned to work with Chinese and Japanese papers that we stained with ink and acrylics and pasted down on heavy paper. This was all quite new and exciting to me.

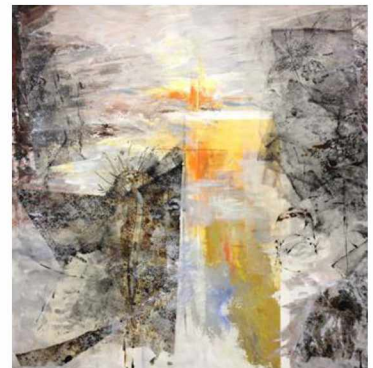


Peripatetic is a collage that I completed at the workshop. I glued Chinese paper stained with black ink to a piece of Hosho Student grade printmaking paper, and added a piece of thicker paper that had been cut from a sheet painted with fluid thalo turquoise.

***Sharon Hollensbe, Peripatetic, Mixed Media, 24x18, 2010***

I felt re-engaged in making art after taking this workshop and came home and got some drop leaf tables from Joan's Fabric to make a large flat work area for staining paper. The black areas in this work are stained collage paper.

***Sharon Hollensbe, Winter Sun, mixed media, 40x36, 2014***





During the next few years, I kept working even though I had doubts about what I was making. Resolution was a painting I had begun in 2005. It underwent several incarnations until Spring 2014, when in one afternoon, I finished it. I could see that it was a good painting, and that my work was improving.

*Sharon Hollensbe, Resolution, oil, 40x30, 2014*

In 2015 I decided to reapply to the MFA program and was admitted for Spring 2016 with all my prior credits restored. I wanted the critiques and guidance of the faculty who would be on my committee. And I wanted confirmation that my work was really getting better. And I wanted to finish what I had started in 1999.



In my first semester as a graduate student, I took one more printmaking class in silk-screen, but began to lose interest. While some of the prints were “okay”, I didn’t feel I was gaining more control over the process, and shifted my focus to painting.

At the time, I thought I would make landscape-based paintings, or rather that my abstract paintings would seem to be about landscape. This did not necessarily occur and the work I produced in 2016 seemed labored and unfinished. I continued to make paintings containing collage elements with somewhat more success.



At one of our meetings, my committee had suggested I try backgrounds other than



white, and since I had more yellow ochre than anything else, I covered the canvas with it. The next day I entered the studio and almost fell against the doorway. The color of the canvas seemed aggressive, and showed yellow ochre was not what I thought it was: rather pale and quiet. I overpainted it with blues and reds and some collage pieces which eventually became Blue Window.

***Sharon Hollensbe, Blue Window, mixed media, 40x30, 2016***

I made several works featuring collage during this period in 2016, but began to feel uneasy. I didn't feel that I was making progress toward a coherent body of work for my MFA show.

After my 15-hour review in December 2016, I had a period of reflection about whether I had been painting what I thought I should paint, rather than making work that was authentically mine, but which might be rejected by my committee. I had spent months repeatedly revising an oil painting of tree trunks that never got any better. I had labored over



an acrylic snowy landscape that was just getting more layers of paint on it that didn't help.

Simultaneously, my work time increased on a painting based on an assemblage I had constructed years earlier in a former Well Street studio I had rented.

***Sharon Hollensbe, Seasonal, mixed media, 52x48, 2018***

While I liked it, Seasonal did not seem to fit anywhere, except possibly with collages I had made



earlier that contained a lot of white. I began experimenting with acrylic absorbent ground and different sets of Golden fluid acrylics: high flow, transparent, and heavy body fluids.

The most interesting and promising works were those where I used Golden Absorbent Ground, and poured fluid acrylics around the surface, then added a lot of water. On top of that mixture, I often placed pieces of plastic wrap to create texture. The earliest of these

***Sharon Hollensbe, untitled, acrylic, 40x30, 2017***

works was Untitled, 2017, that Kes Woodward saw during a critique in late March 2017 that marked a turning point.

Kes, who taught one of my earliest painting classes, volunteered in Fall 2015 to join my graduate committee. While David, my committee chairman, was away on sabbatical leave for the 2016-17 school year, Kes provided critiques of my ongoing work. On this occasion, Kes saw the painting above and immediately liked it, to my surprise, as I didn't like it. During this meeting Kes strongly encouraged me to follow my spontaneity and not to be so critical. I realized that he was right. All my carefulness and hesitance was not working for me. He also suggested that I look at work by Gerhard Richter, about whom I knew very little.

I found Richter's work on YouTube and was immediately captivated by his work and his way of creating it. I purchased the documentary video<sup>i</sup> made in 2011 in which he demonstrates



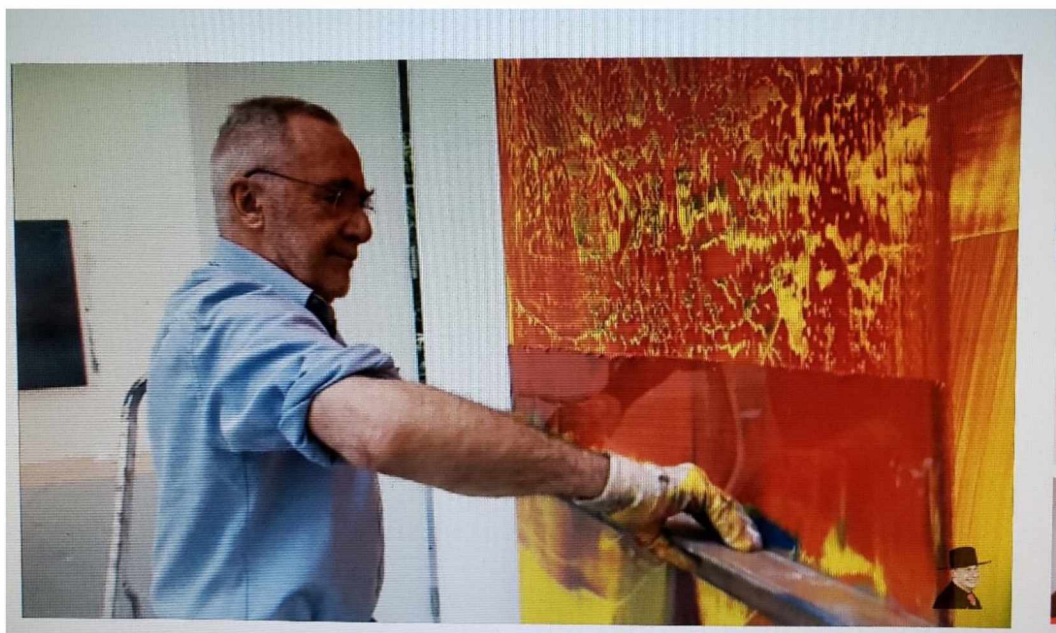
a style of painting he has been using for at least 30 years. In the video, Richter starts with two



big painting surfaces hanging on the wall, and huge buckets typically of red, yellow, and blue oil paint. He uses a wide brush for each color and starts out applying paint in big stripes keeping the colors separated. Then he

begins using whatever brush he's holding to paint lines across all the colors, blending them as he goes. He works first on one painting, and then moves over to work on the other.

After pausing to consider whether the paintings are possibly finished, he takes a 5 or 6 foot squeegee made of what appears to be heavy Plexiglas, and scrapes across the painting from side to side, or up and down. He may also may add more color by coating the squeegee





with paint and spreading it across the painting.

*Abstraktes Bild*, 1987, is an example of Richter's lush colors and strong composition using the squeegee.

***Gerhard Richter, Abstraktes Bild, oil on canvas, 1987***

Although Richter has continued varying his focus – for instance as of 2009, he was still painting over photographs – my interest centered around his painting method as portrayed in the video. Over the summer of 2017 I experimented on some old canvases using a piece of Plexiglas as a squeegee to spread paint over the surface.

After watching the Richter video several times, I decided to use his intermediate



method of simply painting red, yellow and blue colors across the canvas, blending colors on the canvas as I went. The first large work that I made using this method was *Contact*. I did do some light scraping, but mostly to move the paint around. I was also working quickly and spontaneously. This was quite different from my earlier painting style in 2016 where I worked slowly and

laboriously, doing a lot of drawing and sometimes adding collage pieces.

***Sharon Hollensbe, Contact, oil on canvas, 48x48, 2017***



Meanwhile I continued to make acrylic paintings using the method described earlier. In



the example at left, I had started by pouring a yellow and blue background. I then used bottles of fluid acrylics to make expressive lines on the painting. I didn't like the results, so I laid the painting flat, and poured water over it and added some small amounts of acrylic color to stain the whole thing, while leaving the lines essentially

undisturbed. The painting that resulted, *October*, was a more satisfactory outcome, but it became clear as time went on that the style and heavy texture of this painting would not fit into the growing body of work that would eventually comprise the show.



*Sharon Hollensbe, October, acrylic on canvas 36x42, 2017*



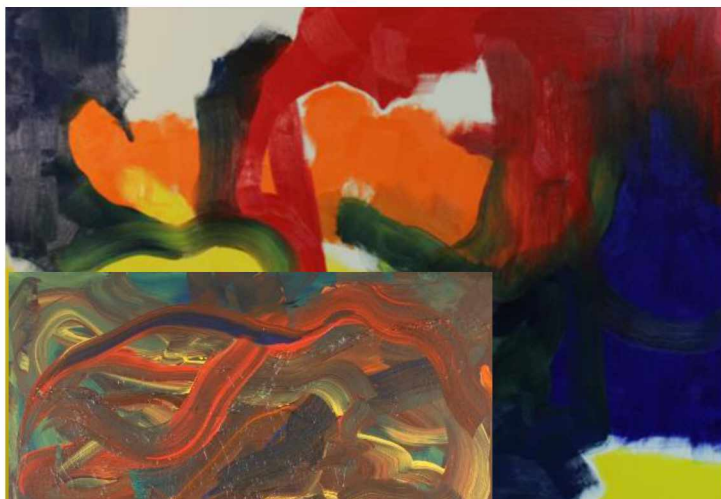
During my next attempt at using oils to work in the manner of Richter, I took photographs at various points to demonstrate how I went about making the painting. At left is the starting point in my garage. I had plenty of

wall space, it was summer, and the fumes from the oils would not get into the house. I started with defined areas of four colors: red, yellow, orange and blue separate pallets and a 3-inch brush for each color. Then I painted across the boundaries of other colors. In this slide, I had mostly painted over the white and had some noticeable green areas from blending the yellow and blue. This version is where I came to a stop. The whole process took about 2 hours the first day and another hour the next day. The photos were very helpful to me in recalling how I made the painting. The painting, *Unclaimed Friends*, was finished at the end of September.



***Sharon Hollensbe, Unclaimed Friends, oil on canvas, 48x60, 2017***

I did very little more with oil until December when I rented a studio at Well Street just for that purpose.



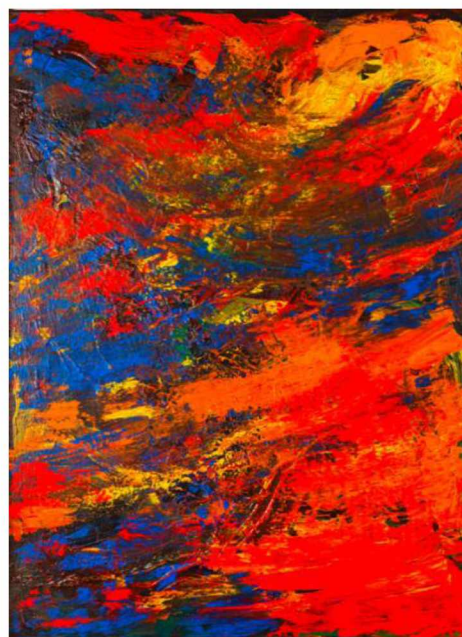
In the meantime, I continued to paint in my home studio with acrylics. Many of these were painted flat, as seen in

the photo at left.

This was an early picture of “Blue Road”. I did

some more

touch-up work

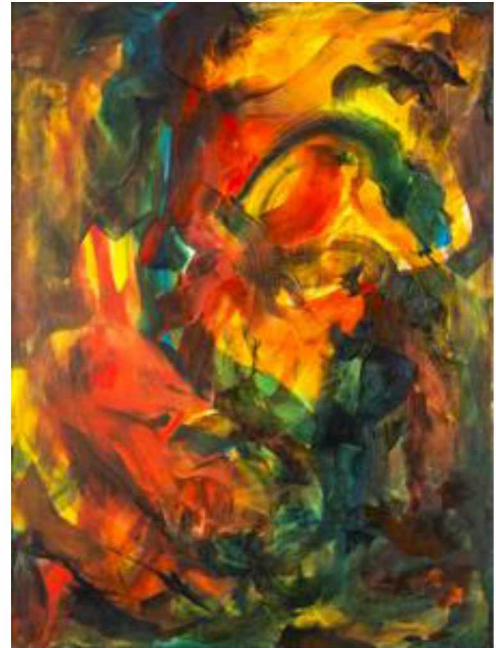


on it, but the initial effort remained largely unchanged.

Others that were painted with a knife were done on an easel. Below on the left is a painting that I made by using a 3-inch brush and fluid acrylics, attempting to replicate the kind of strokes I was doing with oil painting. I didn’t like the outcome, so I painted over it with heavy body







*Sharon Hollensbe, Spilling the Wind, acrylic on canvas, 40x30, 2017*

acrylics and used a knife to spread the paint. On

another acrylic painting, I had better results using the wide brush and trying get the effect that I got on the oil paintings – that is, wide strokes and light coming through from underneath the darker colors. I made a detailed description of the

process. I started by choosing to overpaint a canvas that

*Sharon Hollensbe, Animalia, acrylic on canvas, 40x30, 2017*

I been slowly staining with acrylic fluid paint as though it

were a watercolor painting. This was taking weeks because I had to let it dry between

applications. I decided to take action. I laid the canvas flat on the table, and arranged the

transparent fluid paints (in their small bottles) where I could easily grab them. I squirted yellow

on middle and right side which was closest to me.



Then I added some transparent orange and pushed it over and into the yellow with a soft squeegee. Quickly I let go of that and picked up a 3" brush and squirted some red on the left side of painting. I was working fast with the brush trying to blend the paint as it was drying quickly. I added some

thalo blue and spread that around creating greens. I kept adding yellow here and there hoping



to have that color create more of a glow through the darker colors.

Lastly I tried to touch up the edges with thalo turquoise mixed with some red and yellow where there was no color, using a small brush and my fingers. The whole process took 20 minutes. I left it on the table to dry fully.

At the end of 2017, I began making another big oil painting in the Well Street studio. I started with painting pale yellow over most of canvas.

Then using a 3-inch brush, I added many strokes of deep red, thinned with walnut oil. Then I chose cerulean blue, a color I had not used before on the oil paintings. I happened to apply the first stroke with the large knife I had used to mix the walnut oil in the paint. Very

unexpected blending - startling. I continued to use that knife to spread the rich reds and greens that were emerging. Then I went back to using the paintbrush, trying to get some fully blue and fully red areas. I finally wound up using a DVD plastic holder to scrape waves of color, but I thought it was too narrow. I picked up the wider piece of Plexiglas and used it to integrate all this. Lastly I used the color remaining on the Plexiglas (from scraping the excess) over the yellow area in the lower middle to give it some depth and reduce the intensity of all that yellow. This all took about 1-1/2 hours. I stopped then, though I needed to cover some white areas that were not effective.

On New Year's Day I added more paint to cover the small white areas, which completed the painting. I chose the name Boitier – a French word meaning case or housing - from the label on the DVD plastic cover.

## **CONCLUSION**

An ongoing concern as I made paintings for the show was that they needed to look like they were part of a series, or at least had relationships. For many years I had been told that I needed to try to make works in a series. To some extent I rebelled against this, but partly I couldn't seem to overcome a natural resistance to repeating myself. "I've already done that." At least as time went on, I could see the purpose and benefit of a show in which the works were part of a series. There was a nice coherence that was pleasing to wander through. I think that the relationships in my paintings for this show are mainly the repeated use of red, blue and yellow, plus a lot of the paintings are the same size. It seems to me that these factors succeeded in forming cohesion among the pieces.

On April 4, 2018, I presented a lecture with PowerPoint pictures about my 20-plus years of studying art at the University of Fairbanks. Following that my thesis defense was held at the Well Street Art Company gallery. My MFA show opened there on April 6.

Throughout the years of learning to paint, there were three factors that were always present:

1. The push to experiment and see what would happen.
2. Curiosity and interest in the process, both in my work and in that of other artists.
3. The strong appeal of colors.

In summary, as I was writing this paper, I noticed that I didn't have much feeling for the paintings I made. It seemed that once they were finished I was no longer very interested. They didn't represent something deep within, but were mostly just experiments—made to see what would happen and what would I like to see. I'm not sure if this is an ultimate truth. I am concerned about authenticity, and this may be the best I can do right now.

As I near graduation, I feel that I have gotten what I wanted from finishing this MFA. I see a lot of improvement in my work now, and also possibilities for further exploration. Gerhard Richter has had a recent influence in my painting process, but Richard Diebenkorn and Robert Rauschenberg remain my favorite artists, and I think I'll find some ways to learn more from them.

I feel deep appreciation to the UAF Art Department and the teachers and students who have been such an important part of my experience. Right now I think that I may actually be ready to leave – perhaps embarking on another experiment to see what will happen.

## **ARTIST STATEMENT**

The exploration of color combinations and their relationship to abstract compositions form the basis of my work. Over time, I have employed various types of marks, oil paint, acrylic paint, paper collage, ink, pencil and charcoal to create works on canvas and paper.

I have been motivated by the urge to experiment and the love of surprise. What might happen if I do this or that? Where will it lead me? At this point it has led me to abstraction – the non-representational painting that contains a strong feeling element, mostly mediated by colors. And changes are always possible. By the next day very often a painting has somehow changed so that I see it differently. Lately, I have shifted from working mostly with acrylic paint to using oil paint where I create color combinations directly on the canvas rather than mixing paint ahead of time. By using oils, I can rework the composition and colors as I go because the paint dries slowly. For this type of work, I hang the canvas on the wall and use large paintbrushes and big tubes of oil paint thinned with walnut oil.



I have also been exploring this method using acrylic paint. Acrylics, especially fluid acrylics, dry very quickly, so this means working rapidly and spontaneously, which makes the process engaging. If I'm not happy, overpainting is always an option and often results in new directions, new visions. It seems sometimes as though a painting is never finished, but eventually I have to decide whether more changes help or are just change for its own sake. If so, that is the time to let go and decide that it's finished.

## **RESUME APRIL 2018**

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**Education:** 1975 Ph.D. in Psychology, Georgia State University, Atlanta, Georgia  
2018 MFA in Painting, University of Alaska Fairbanks, Fairbanks, Alaska.

## **Juried Exhibitions**

- 1998 Spring Student Art Show, University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF),  
Printmaking, Honorable Mention, Fairbanks, Alaska
- 1998 64<sup>th</sup> Parallel Juried Art Show, Bear Civic Center Gallery, Fairbanks, Alaska
- 1998 UAF Student Fall Art Show, Printmaking, two Honorable Mentions
- 1999 "Work in Process", National Student Printmaking Exhibition, Arizona  
State University, Tempe, Arizona
- 1999 "Watermark '99 - Works on Paper", Studio 107, Southeastern Community  
College, Whiteville, North Carolina
- 1999 64<sup>th</sup> Parallel Juried Art Show, Bear Civic Center Gallery, Fairbanks, Alaska
- 2000 64<sup>th</sup> Parallel Juried Art Show, Bear Civic Center Gallery, Fairbanks, Alaska
- 2002 64<sup>th</sup> Parallel Juried Art Show, Bear Civic Center Gallery, Fairbanks, Alaska
- 2003 Patterns of Influence Juried Show, Bear Civic Center Gallery, Fairbanks,  
Alaska
- 2003 64<sup>th</sup> Parallel Juried Art Show, Bear Civic Center Gallery, Fairbanks, Alaska
- 2004 Patterns of Influence Juried Show, Bear Civic Center Gallery, Fairbanks,  
Alaska

- 2004 Art Port Townsend Juried Show, Northwind Arts Center, Port Townsend, Washington
- 2008 64<sup>th</sup> Parallel Juried Art Show, Bear Civic Center Gallery, Fairbanks, Alaska
- 2010 64<sup>th</sup> Parallel Juried Art Show, Bear Civic Center Gallery, Fairbanks, Alaska
- 2011 64<sup>th</sup> Parallel Juried Art Show, Bear Civic Center Gallery, Fairbanks, Alaska
- 2014 64<sup>th</sup> Parallel Juried Art Show, Bear Civic Center Gallery, Fairbanks, Alaska
- 2015 64<sup>th</sup> Parallel Juried Art Show, Bear Civic Center Gallery, Fairbanks, Alaska
- 2016 Patterns of Influence Juried Show, Barbara Lavallee, Juror, Honorable Mention, Bear Civic Center Gallery, Fairbanks, Alaska
- 2018 Whimsy Juried Show, Rachelle Dowdy, Juror, Bear Civic Center Gallery, Fairbanks, Alaska.

- Solo Shows**
- 2016 Phillips Gallery, Fairbanks, Alaska
  - 2018 MFA Final Show, Well Street Art Gallery, Fairbanks, Alaska

#### **Invitational Shows**

- 2001 Letters Home group invitational show, Fairbanks and Anchorage, Alaska
- 2002 Invitational group show, Well Street Art Company, Fairbanks, Alaska
- 2003 Invitational group show, Well Street Art Company, Fairbanks, Alaska

#### **Workshops Attended**

- 1999 Printmaking Workshop, Andrew Mockler, Provincetown Fine Arts Work Center, Provincetown, Massachusetts
- 2010 Collage: Paper Only workshop, Fran Skiles at Nancy Crow Art Retreats, Columbus, Ohio
- 2010 Printmaking with Akua Ink, Ron Pokrasso, Santa Fe, New Mexico

**PAINTINGS IN MFA EXHIBITION APRIL 6, 2018**



*Sharon Hollensbe, Finding Water, acrylic, 30x40, 2018*



*Sharon Hollensbe, The Homestead, Oil, 40x30, 2017*



*Sharon Hollensbe, Animalia, acrylic, 40x30, 2017*



*Sharon Hollensbe, Blue Road, acrylic, 40x30, 2017*



*Sharon Hollensbe, Spilling the Wind, 40x30, 2017*



*Sharon Hollensbe, Daybreak, acrylic, 30x40, 2018*



*Sharon Hollensbe, Transparent, acrylic, 40x30, 2015*



*Sharon Hollensbe, Prospector, oil, 30x40, 2018*



*Sharon Hollensbe, Still Waiting, acrylic, 42x48, 2017*



*Sharon Hollensbe, Contact, oil, 48x48, 2017*



*Sharon Hollensbe, Unclaimed Friends, oil, 48x60, 2017*



*Sharon Hollensbe, Boitier, oil, 48x60, 2018*

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Once again, I thank Sandra Hoefner for her support through years, and for flying to Fairbanks from Grand Junction, CO, to be here for my final show.

I would like thank Susan Farnham, MFA, for phone chats and emails and for reviewing my final report more than once for errors and coherence.

The photos of the paintings in the show were taken by MFA student and UAF campus photographer, J. R. Anchetta. I would like to thank him in addition for his efforts to teach me how to use Google Drive, an ongoing mystery.

Scott Holladay made the beautiful frames for the paintings hanging in the gallery. He had a time crunch but got everything done on time.



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<sup>i</sup> Belz, Corinna, *Gerhard Richter Painting*, Kino Lorber, Germany, 2012.